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ABSTRACT

The contributions of peer interaction to the development of social competence in kindergarten children are discussed in terms of research findings and implications for teachers. Using naturalistic methodology, social behavior was studied by observing interactions among children in classroom settings without direct adult supervision. In peer interactions, children were seen accomplishing social goals in three domains: affiliation goals, competence goals, and status goals. Examples of peer interactions in these three areas are described and serve as a basis for teachers in understanding social interaction in their classrooms, new ways of thinking about children's motives and values, and alternative frameworks for planning and implementing classroom activities. Four sets of teacher roles which may help teachers organize their decisionmaking about social development in their classrooms are given: (1) establishing classroom social context, (2) modeling appropriate social behavior, (3) coaching appropriate social strategies, and (4) teaching social awareness. (DST)

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Child-to-Child Interactions: Findings and Implications from a Naturalistic Study in Kindergarten

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Child-to-Child Interactions: Findings and Implications from a Naturalistic Study in Kindergarten*

What are the functions of children's interactions among themselves? What is going on for children when they interact with their peers in classroom contexts? What is the relationship between what adults do in face-to-face interactions and what children do face-to-face? What are children's social goals peer interactions? These are the questions which have guided my investigations into child-to-child social behavior in several kindergarten classrooms. In this article, I will describe the findings from one such study and suggest frameworks for thinking about child-to-child interaction which may be helpful as teachers make decisions and implement programs designed to encourage social development in their students.

FINDINGS: CHILDREN'S SOCIAL GOALS

The study reported here was conducted in an "all-day" kindergarten in a racially integrated elementary school. The school was located in a large urban school district in the southeastern United States. The methodology of naturalistic inquiry was used in this study. Participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and the collection of classroom artifacts are the data gathering techniques of this type of research. Data are systematically analyzed using methods developed in anthropology and qualitative sociology. Results are analytic descriptions of naturally occuring social behaviors in particular contexts. The contexts of this study were the various

social environments of a kindergarten classroom. The social behaviors of interest were contained in interactions among children in classroom settings without direct adult supervision. The data include over eighty hours of children's social behavior recorded in field notes. The field-notes are transcriptions of hundreds of child-to-child interactions (for a detailed description of methods and setting, see , 1984). Descriptive findings from the analysis of these events, along with interview and artifact data, are organized into "social goals."

In their interactions with classroom peers, children sought to accomplish social goals in three domains: affiliation goals, competence goals, and status goals. Children's affiliation goals were to feel that they were connected with others, that others perceived them as worthy social interactants, and that others cared about them and wanted to do things with them. Their competence goals were to feel that they were competent individuals, capable of accomplishing school tasks, and that they were recognized as members of the group which is achieving what is expected in school. Status goals were to feel that they were superior to or more important than others, that they were able to manipulate or control the actions of others, and that they were able to assert their own status in relationship to the status of others.

It was not particularly surprising to discover that five- and six-year-old children are interested in establishing affiliations, demonstrating competence, and exercising power over others. Social psychologists have related the development of self-concept to the expression of these factors (see Schmuck, 1978). What was a surprise was the degree to which five- and six-year-old children's interactions were influenced by these goals and the sophistication of children as they, in concert with their peers, negotiated the norms, rules, and expectations which defined how these goals could be worked out.

Affiliation Goals

Children spent abundant amounts of time and emotional energy working to establish themselves as worthy affiliates in their kindergarten classrooms. A variety of strategies which children used to make contact with peers, to check on standings with peers, and to express feeling of affection and belonging were identified in the analysis.

Ways to make contact included using direct requests and invitations. Requests were questions such as, "Will you play with me?" delivered one-to one, or public appeals; e.g., "Who will play with me?" Invitations were usually, "You wanna . . .?" questions; for example, "You wanna go in the playhouse?" or, "You wanna play with playdough?"

While children were working and playing together, they made contact using conversation openers which revealed the utilization of an interaction etiquette similar to that of adults. Children used conversation openers which compel response from others. They used questions, appeals to the reciprocal nature of good manners, and compliments as they sought social contact with their classmates.

Indirect strategies were used to make contact. These included teasing, clowning, joking, and baby talk. Indirect strategies proved an automatic escape if rejection ensued. The child whose indirect attempts were not well received could protest, "I was just playing."

Sometimes children placed themselves in close proximity with others involved in social interaction without using verbal entry moves. In studies of the interactions of preschoolers, "nonverbal entry" strategies were the most frequently used "access rituals" employed by the children (Corsaro, 1979). In the kindergarten setting of this study, moving closer to others almost never provided access to interactions. This may explain why the "proximity strategy" was used so infrequently.

Ways to check on standings with peers were strategies for finding out how others were seeing them. Children used direct and indirect approaches to determine where they stood as affiliation partners. As with contact strategies, the more direct the method of gaining responses, the higher the risk of rejection. The typical form of direct checks on standings with peers was, "I like you; do you like me?" A negative response to such a question was difficult to deliver. The askers exhibited their vulnerability by expressing their affection and then, in effect, dared their friends to reject their overtures.

Children used indirect approaches more often than direct approaches to get feedback on their standings with peers. "We're the same, huh?" was a common form for indirect approaches in this area. Children worked at aligning themselves with others by pointing out similarities in their classwork, experiences, and superior standing in relation to others.

Ways to express feelings of affection and belonging were identified. As noted above, direct expressions of affection such as "I love you" or "I like you" were rare and usually followed with an appeal for a reciprocation of feeling; i.e., "Do you love/like me?" Children utilized a number of other strategies for expressing their affection for one another. One such strategy was to shower affiliates with attention, praise, or offers of gifts. In addition, children offered help to other children, shared materials, and performed minor courtesies as ways of expressing feelings of affection. These interaction moves were exchanged among virtually all of the children on occasion. It was clear across observations that being cooperative, helpful, and courteous were valued by children as they interacted. They used these behaviors to send important affiliation signals.

Another way children expressed feelings of affection was to take

the side of a peer involved in a dispute or to come to the aid of a peer who had been physically or emotionally hurt. Children understood that expressions of loyalty and sympathy were valuable tools for demonstrating their worth as affiliates. Their support and consolations were often dramatic and public in manifestation, as if to guarantee the impression that "I'm the kind of person who cares about and stands up for my friends."

Children in the study expressed their feelings of affection through physical contact. They hugged, wrestled, bumped and nudged, held hands, groomed, and touched each other in all classroom contexts. For boys and girls, being in physical contact with peers was very important. Often boys were observed putting a "roughhouse" face on their touching. They wrestled, pushed, and bumped more often than girls. While waiting for a turn at a game or lining up for lunch, boys were more likely to be picking each other up or gripping each other in headlocks, while girls might be holding hands or playing with each other's hair or clothing.

To summarize affiliation strategies, children used peer interactions to accomplish the social objectives of establishing contact, receiving feedback on their perceived worthiness as affiliates, and expressing feelings of affection and belonging. They demonstrated a developing sophistication in their knowledge of social etiquette and they utilized a complex variety of interaction strategies for accomplishing their affiliation goals.

Competence Goals

Competence goals were discovered to be a second unifying domain of children's social objectives. In their face-to-face interactions with peers, children utilized a variety of strategies to establish that they were able students, capable of accomplishing school tasks, and that they deserved to be classified among the academically competent.

Children's classroom interactions were full of evaluative behavior. Children scrutinized the work of others and offered evaluations. Often they compared their work with that of others and frequently solicited evaluations from peers. They made special efforts to associate themselves with peers who were thought to be academically successful.

Children evaluated and sought the evaluation of peers. Analysis of patterns of evaluation exchanges suggested that children were using interactions to establish and confirm their academic competence in relation to others. They were constantly exchanging information upon which determinations of competence were based.

Competence, as it is being used here, refers only to skills, abilities, and achievements related to things academic. Children's competence goals were identified through the analysis of face-to-face behavior around the classroom work in these kindergartens. Ways to request evaluation and ways to respond to evaluation were domains of behavior which led to an understanding of children's social goals in this area.

Ways to request evaluation were classified as direct or indirect. While working on their assigned tasks at the independent work table, children often stopped working, held up their work to a peer, and said, "Look at this," or "How's this?" Children varied this direct approach to requesting evaluation by forming "loaded" questions designed to influence the evaluation and/or provide a protective cover in the event that the evaluation was negative. An example of a loaded request follows:

> Louise and James are painting. Louise comes to James' side of the easel, studies his painting, says: "Oh, your sun is pretty, wanna see my pretty sun?"

Children demonstrated a well developed awareness of the ways that phrasing questions or timing the delivery of questions can influence responses. Louise, in the example, set up a situation in which it would be very difficult for James to do other than find her sun pretty. In order to evaluate her sun as less than pretty, he would have to openly challenge her view that her sun was pretty and prove himself insensitive to her generous evaluation of his efforts.

In addition to direct requests, loaded and otherwise, children utilized other ways of requesting evaluation. The expectation that peer evaluation would take place was so well developed in the classroom that it reached the taken-for-granted level. On many occasions, when children completed particular tasks or even steps within tasks, they simply held their papers toward peers, said nothing, and, as expected, received evaluations. The understood quality of peer evaluation provided a context in which statements such as "I'm through" or "Finished" became abbreviated forms of evaluation requests. The taken-for-granted nature of evaluation request patterns provides strong evidence for the importance of peer evaluation in the social world of this classroom.

Ways to respond to evaluation is an analytic domain which gives insight into how important the appearance of competence was in the studied classroom. When positive evaluations were received, children reacted with joy, reciprocal praise, and occasional arrogance. Children demonstrated a great need to receive positive feedback on their schoolwork. Their reputations as competent students were at risk in each interaction involving evaluation. When evaluations were favorable, they showed their relief and satisfaction.

Negative evaluations from peers brought out an assortment of strategies for dealing with the effects of such evaluations on children's

goals of feeling competent and appearing competent to classmates. Children's responses to negative evaluations ranged from attacking the evaluator to quietly acceding to his or her judgement.

On several occasions, children reacted to negative peer evaluations by taking offensive (as opposed to defensive) action against those evaluating them. Most commonly, they turned negative judgements back on the evaluators. Occasionally they tossed bitter retorts back at evaluators or attempted to discredit evaluators by making them appear callous or cruel.

Children used joking and laughter to diminish the effects of negative evaluations. When one child pointed out: "You cut on the wrong line," the child doing the cutting started snipping wildly and laughed to show that it was really a meaningless error to him. Children also blamed outside influences as the source of their errors. When one child glued the wrong object into a classification set and was caught by her peers, she pointed to her friend and said, "She made me do it."

Children sometimes flatly denied that their work was deficient. They covered their work with their arms, turned their papers face down, and even corrected errors while protesting, "It is not wrong."

Another frequently used response to negative evaluation was simply not to acknowledge it. Children changed the subject, turned away from evaluators, or carefully ignored their critics in order to avoid dealing with negative critiques.

A final way children responded to negative evaluations was to accept the accuracy of the criticism, though begrudgingly at times, and move to correct the problem. Statments such as "I know" and "I'm gonna fix it" were common in such responses. Children taking this tack tried

to minimize their embarrassment by quickly admitting their mistake so that evaluators were made to appear insensitive if they continued drawing attention to the error.

Children's complex ways of seeking and responding to peer evaluations demonstrate how they used child-to-child interactions to accomplish competence goals. When they interacted in peer groups where schoolwork was the topic of substance, their social objectives included feeling competent with regard to school tasks and believing that others placed them among those students considered to be capable.

Status Goals

Status, as it is used here, assumes the possibility of constructing a hierarchical arrangement of children from those with the least influence and peer esteem to those most respected and most able to exercise power over others (see Freedman, 1977; Strayer and Strayer, 1976). Children's interactions reflected their efforts to improve their position in such a hierarchy. Children's status objectives included the following: to feel more important or better in some ways than classroom peers, to be able to exercise dominance over others, to manipulate or control the actions of others, and to be able to assert their standing in relationship to the status of others. These goals were evident in many of the interactions analyzed in this study.

Children's conversations in small groups often followed this general form: one child made a statement which reflected his or her superiority (an accomplishment, a possession, or a personal quality was usually described); other children matched or topped the original statement with proclamations of their own; the first speaker reasserted his/her superiority; and the cycle continued. An example of this common form follows.

Don: "I'm tellin' my pet fox to come to school." (Coloring a fox picture is part of their assignment at table 2.) James: "I'ma tell my pet fox to come to school." Don: "I'ma tellin' all my foxes to come to school." Roger: "I'ma have my daddy beat you all up." Don: "I gonna have all my foxes beat all those that's not my friend." Tess: "So what? I've got a German Shepherd." James: "I've got a German Shepherd." Sarah: "So, I got a Doberman." Don: "I've got a bunch." Tess to Don: "My German Shepherd'll bite you." Don: "I've got lots of zoo animals."

In one-to-one interactions and in small groups, children found a variety of ways to promote their own importance and to devalue the importance of others. They spent considerable time and energy introducing favorable information about themselves and unfavorable information about others. Whereas adults practice such behaviors in highly ritualized and subtle ways (Goffman, 1967), children in this study felt no need to disguise their self-promotions or attacks on others. The norm was to proclaim superiority, then defend against the inevitable challenges; or in the case of "put-downs," to point out the inadequacies of others, then react to their protestations.

Much of children's interaction was characterized by the point-counterpoint quality of the example. The abilities to present one's self in a favorable light and to generate credible counters to status threatening behaviors by peers were important assets in an atmosphere in which relative status was redefined over and over. In the following sections, ways to practice self-promotion, ways to respond to self-promotion, ways to put others down, and ways to defend against put-downs will be presented.

Ways to practice self-promotion involved offering information in interactions which had the effect of making the offerer appear superior in some way. In their most basic form, self-promotions were built on I am . . ., I can . . ., I did . . ., I will . . ., I have . . ., or I know . . . statements. Examples are: "I can talk Mexico;" "I have a Strawberry Shortcake;" and "I know what's 100 and 100."

Closely related to this basic "I am superior" form were statements in which children identified characteristics or possessions of family members, or others with whom the children were closely associated, which cast a favorable light on the speaker. Frequently these self-promotions began with "My daddy . . ." or "My mommy . . .." The most common statement among statements of this kind was, "My daddy can beat your daddy."

Ways to respond to self-promotions were as important to achieving status goals as self-promoting or aggressive kinds of moves. As relative status was defined and redefined in children's interactions, the ability to utilize a variety of defensive-reactive strategies for neutralizing the promotions of others, while placing one's self in a favorable position, was a valuable asset. Some of the strategies used by children in response to self-promoting behaviors of peers are described below.

Children utilized "one-upsmanship" and "bandwagon" strategies in response to self-promotions. One-upsmanship responses attempted to neutralize or diminish the effects of self-promotions by matching or topping the promoter's information. When one child announced, "I can count to a hundred," another claimed, "So, I can count to two-hundred." Bandwagon strategies were responses in which the respondents reacted to self-promotions by identifying themselves with the promoter or with the behavior being promoted. When a child asserted, "I got a duck that

smells," two other children responded, "I got one of those little ducks," and "I do too."

Children used challenges to devalue the sources from which self-promoters were trying to gain status, or to discredit the self-promoters themselves. Children used approaches which ranged from simple challenges such as "I don't believe you" or "No, you didn't" to more complex challenges which involved building logical cases against the contentions of promoters.

Another way children responded to self-promotions was to simply ignore them. Again, children's refusals to respond to direct communication from peers are almost unknown in adult interaction. When ignoring does occur with adults, the message to the interactant whose communication is ignored is, "You have so little status that I owe you not even the most basic courtesy." When children ignored self-promoting behaviors, promoters were not devastated but carried on as if the object of their promotions had simply not heard them.

A final way in which children responded to self-promotion was to accept the credibility of the promoter and the validity of his or her claims. Accepting responses were very rarely observed in the study. When acceptance was observed, it was apparent that affiliation goals (to appear to be a conciliatory, therfore attractive, affiliate) took precedence over status goals.

Ways to put others down were identified. Children's relative positions in the classroom status hierarchy could be improved by raising themselves up or by causing the influence and peer prestige of others to go down. Ways of aggressively attempting to damage the status of others I call "Put-downs." Successful put-downs not only caused others to lose influence or prestige, but offered evidence of the power

and social adeptness of the child accomplishing the put-down.

The most common kind of put-downs occurred when children pointed out the mistakes, weaknesses, or inadequacies of others. These and other put-downs had a "public" quality which is important to understanding their place in children's status goals. Put-downs were seldom communicated in private conversations from individual to individual, but were almost always undertaken with a wider audience in mind. Social esteem rests in the perceptions of others. Children publicly proclaimed the inadequacies of peers in an effort to maximize the impact of the put-down.

Occasionally, some children used subtle strategies for revealing unfavorable information about peers while securing favorable status for themselves. One such strategy was to turn a condescending attitude on classmates (e.g., "You're actin' silly, I'm doin' somethin' else," or 'We're not talkin' like that, we're not even going to repeat it"). Another indirect kind of strategy was to confront others with "loaded" questions. Loaded questions were those which, while appearing to be innocent, were calculated to force children to either do what the asker wished or place themselves in an unfavorable position (e.g., "Are you going to make me an 'I love you' card or just a plain one?").

Name calling was another put-down strategy used by children. Frequently, name calling accompanied other put-downs. Name calling included pointed statements such as, "You're stupid" and "You're the baddest kid in here" as well as derogatory references such as "dumbhead," "dork," and "do-do head." Some researchers have suggested that name calling signals the young child's ability to distinguish between words and the things they symbolize (Elkind, 1976). The name calling described here did not have the quality of verbal play. There was an element of dominance in name calling behavior, as if an understood part of the

message sent when calling another child "dork" was, "and I dare you to do something about it."

Children demonstrated their attempts to exercise power over peers in ordering behavior, threats, and physical intimidation. Ordering behaviors were usually associated with establishing territories, securing materials, or managing the behavior of others. Children used an ordering tone to get children to change locations (e.g., "sit down," "get away from me," "move over"); to acquire materials ("gimme that," "get some more"); and to control others ("don't do that," "stop that," "keep quiet"). Children threatened each other with physical attack (e.g., "I'ma hit you," "I'll give you a black eye"); with exposure to the teacher ("I'm gonna tell") and with unspecified consequences in "you better" statements ("you better not mess with me," "you better stop") which carried an unspoken but clearly communicated "or else" with them. Physical force was used by a small number of children and during the study no "fights" between children were observed.

Children generally were not gracious winners when they came out on top in confrontations with peers. A final way children put others down was to "rub it in" when one child bested another. Public proclamations such as, "I beat you," "I got it and you didn't, " or "I showed you" were common in the classroom. Rubbing it in behavior serves to accent the critical point; putting others down was a strategy children used for improving their relative status by diminishing the influence and prestige of others while asserting their own.

Ways to respond to put downs were defensive responses to put-down attempts by peers. These defensive strategies were important to children as they worked at protecting their status from the potential damages others could inflict. Since being foiled in attempts to discredit others

offered public evidence of a kind of social ineptness, defensive responses probably served to deter put-downs to some degree.

One way children responded to put-downs was to categorically deny the accuracy of the information presented in the put-down. Such denials had the tone of rightious indignation. Usually these took form in statements such as "No, I didn't" or "Yes, I can," The tone of categorical denials seemed to carry the additional message, "And I'll hear no more about it."

Children also tried to refute logically the accuracy of negative information directed at them. They constructed logical cases from the actual situations involved, called on other children to witness the efficacy of their arguments, and on occasion, fabricated evidence in their own defense.

Another strategy for handling put-downs was to take an offensive posture and turn the aggression of the put-down back on the child making the original move. The most common form of this strategy was to turn name calling, ordering, or threats around and direct them back on aggressors in the same form. "You're a baby, Jerome" elicited "You're a baby, James;" "You better move" was answered with "You better move." Sometimes children's aggressive responses went beyond echoing original put-downs. Some children embarrassed their challengers by accusing them of being "crazy" or "actin' funny." Some children launched full-blown retaliatory put-downs of those who challenged their status. These counter put-downs were not necessarily related in substance to the original accusations. The purpose of the counter attack was to impress on the challenger and others in the group that "I am not to be taken lightly" and that "those who attack me put themselves at risk."

Another set of responses to put-downs included an array of aggressive sounding but empty rebuttals such as, "So," "Oh yeah," "Shuddup," and

"You better stop." These responses were voiced by children who had experienced a loss of prestige because of a put-down and who wanted to salvage some self-respect with a comment. However, they were at a loss for words and could offer only a rebuttal that conveyed anger but was empty of substance.

Children also used turning away, changing the subject, and other forms of ignoring in response to put-down attempts. When children were in situations where their mistakes or inadequacies were being exposed by others, they often dropped their eyes to the floor, their chins to their chests, folded their arms, and waited for the spotlight to pass. Children in such situations were also observed turning away from accusors to begin conversation with someone else, ignoring the put-down, or offering an entirely new line of conversation. Sometimes they physically left the scene.

Another response to put-downs was to make a public appeal for sympathy. This kind of defense was used to deter physical aggression by exposing the cruelty of aggressors and attracting protective support from others. Loud cries of "You hurt me" or "That hurt," and dramatic weeping were used to bring acts of physical aggression to public attention.

A final way children responded to put-downs was to accept the accuracy of negative information but work to reduce the effects by making a public confession, offering excuses, explaining the lack of severity of the offense, or "laughing off" the exposure as unimportant. Children made public gestures of accepting responsibility or making confessions as strategies for reducing the damaging effects of being exposed in a compromising position. Typically they made a show of correcting mistakes ("See, I fixed it") or promised to do better ("I'm going to do it right next time"). In some cases, they turned the words of their challengers on

themselves, as in the following exchange:

Sue: "Bob get to work, you're makin' me mad." Bob: "Yeah, I'm makin' me mad, too."

Children offered excuses to mitigate their embarrassment. Excuses included those related to the source of put-downs ("I lost my paper" or "I wasn't through yet") and those of a more general character ("I have a sore ear"). Children sometimes tried to reduce the impact of put-downs by laughing them off or explaining that they were not important. When faced with physical domination by others, some children allowed the aggressors to have their way, then covered by laughing and/or making statements to recover their status (e.g., "So, I don't care").

To summarize status goals, children utilized face-to-face interactions to assert their status in relation to peers. They demonstrated facility with a number of offensive and defensive strategies for exercising power, establishing influence, and acquiring prestige in their peer interactions.

IMPLICATIONS

It is not the intent here to give the impression that these findings generalize across all kindergartens. I begin each study with the assumption that the norms, values, and expectations of a classroom peer culture are products of interaction and are, therefore, always being reshaped and redefined. Every group of kindergarteners brings a complex and unique set of personal experiences to school. In addition, each kindergarten is imbedded in a different social context. I would expect and I have seen different strategies and different emphases on different social goals depending on the values and expectations of the teacher, the task organization of the class, and the norms and values of the communities in which children live.

The value of examining particular contexts in detail is that teachers and other educational decision makers are provided with an analytic description which they can use as a framework for thinking about their own educational settings. Hinely and Ponder (1979) made a useful distinction between "improvers" and "describers" as they discussed the development and utilization of theory and research. Researchers interested in improvement begin with questions such as, "How can things be changed?" For describers, three questions are of key importance. "A descriptive question -- what seems to be happening here?; an analytical question -- why are these events occurring?; and a question of understanding -- what do these events mean in the context of the classroom?" (Hinely & Ponder, 1979, p. 135). The work reported here is descriptive. The goal has been to provide a description and analysis intended to improve understandings of what actually happens in the social context of a real classroom. It is hoped that teachers and others responsible for children's experiences in school will find the descriptive findings of this study useful in understanding the ecology of classroom cultures. Teachers are observers of child behavior, hypotheses makers, and planners (Schultz, Florio, & Erickson, 1982). The descriptions and analyses of this research may give teachers an enriched base from which to understand social interaction in their classrooms, new ways of thinking about children's motives and values, and alternative frameworks for planning and implementing classroom activities.

I will conclude by offering some implications for early childhood educators. I have organized these suggestions by identifying four sets of teacher roles which might help teachers organize their thinking about ways they can facilitate social development in their classrooms. I began this article by pointing out that my approach to

educational research is descriptive. I have not set up controlled conditions in which strategies for improving social development were tested so I don't have prescribed TO DO'S for teachers. I have looked closely at the literature on social development, borrowed some ideas from others, and put them with my own. I start with the premise that teachers make the decisions that determine what life is like in classrooms. I hope the teacher role sets I describe will help teachers put a framework on their decision making concerning social development in their classrooms.

Teacher Role-Sets for Classroom Social Development

1. Teachers establish contexts
2. Teachers model behavior
3. Teachers coach social strategies
4. Teachers teach social awareness

Establishing Contexts

The basic elements of a classroom social context are the physical organization of space, the task expectations, and the participants. I believe it is important for children to interact with other children in contexts away from the direct supervision of adults. This does not mean that children need separate rooms for peer interaction, but that as room space is organized, thought should be given to setting up places where children can join into small groups.

The task organization of early childhood settings ought to be varied for a number of educationally sound reasons. By giving children opportunities to interact among themselves while participating in a variety of tasks, teachers are helping them learn a variety of social lessons and practice a variety of interaction strategies. Virtually any task,

from dramatic play to "independent" assignments, can be completed in contexts which encourage peer interaction.

Teachers, can use their knowledge of individual needs and differences as they establish social contexts. By varying the number of participants and by deciding who the participants will be in classroom contexts, the teacher can have a significant impact. For example, a child who has difficulty joining large groups of children should be given chances to enter smaller groups of children who are adept at making contact.

By looking closely at the physical arrangement of space in the room, by encouraging a variety of classroom tasks, and by monitoring and guiding children's participation patterns, teachers can establish contexts that promote social development.

Modeling Behavior

It is axiomatic that teachers ought to model appropriate social behavior. Anyone who has spent any time in early childhood classrooms knows that teachers are powerful role models for children. When children "play school," for example, it is evident that the role of teacher taken in the dramatic play is greatly influenced by the teachers classroom behavior. It is almost certain that teachers' pet phrases (such as, "I'm tired of waiting" or "Let's go through it step-by-step") will find their way into children's play.

The teacher models the social role of teacher and the child observes and learns. The teacher also models the social role of adult and the child observes and learns from this role as well. Teachers who have a particular interest in social development in their classrooms might take some time to examine the social lessons they are teaching via how they interact with other adults and with children. If teachers are committed to helping children develop social competence, they need to

take care to demonstrate the importance of both producing and interpreting communication. Teachers should practice making meaningful contacts with children, contacts in which the child is expected (along with the teacher) to produce communication events with beginnings, endings, and shared meanings.

Further, when teachers recognize that a particular class or child or group of children seem to be having trouble in a particular area, they can decide to emphasize behaviors which relate to the troublesome area in their modeling. For example, the teacher may notice that a particular child has difficulty obtaining materials from peers and make a special effort to model asking strategies or self-assertion strategies in situations involving the child.

Coaching Strategies

Coaching goes one step beyond the modeling done in the previous example. With modeling, the teacher demonstrates strategies but does not identify the problem or point out overtly the utility of the demonstrated behaviors. In coaching, teachers help students who are having social difficulties recognize their "problems" and make plans for doing better. Opportunities for coaching happen incidentally throughout the day and may involve simple questions such as "How do you think he feels when you say that?" or "What is a way to find out if she likes your picture?" Other problems may require long term assistance. Some children will require lots of monitoring and an ongoing coaching relationship with the teacher. Coaching involves the teacher in being aware of what's going on for individual children, being prepared to suggest alternative behaviors, and providing feedback on the effectiveness of attempted changes.

This emphasis on coaching should not be interpreted as suggesting

that teachers wander the room looking for children's interactions to interrupt. On the contrary, interventions into children's interactions should be minimized. If the physical space and tasks of the classroom have been organized to encourage child-to-child interaction away from adults, those contexts should be entered by teachers only to prevent injury or to protect children from psychological battering. The process of working out their conflicts may be much more important than the outcomes, so children should learn to work through their own problems.

Coaching is a reactive strategy for helping children learn alternative behaviors, not a tool for solving children's conflicts. It is the wise teacher who establishes the expectation that children's conflicts will be settled by children. The teacher will supply support, guidance, and guarantee the safety of each child, but not take responsibility for solving social problems among children.

Teaching Awareness

Coaching is reactive teaching. It makes sense that social awareness can be addressed through direct, proactive teaching as well. There are a variety of commercially produced materials, storybooks, and programs designed to encourage social development. The use of these is appropriate if the experiences help children become aware of themselves as social actors, develop an expanded sensitivity to the needs and communicative intentions of others, and learn appropriate and effective strategies for interacting with others. Teachers' decisions about what experiences to provide for children should always be related to the aims they have for their students. Going through a kit because the school purchased one makes no more sense for social development than for math or reading. A better approach is to identify a set of objectives, then decide what will be done and what will be needed to get it done. Such a program for

developing social awareness might include experiences with role-playing, class discussion, literature, films, puppetry, and commercially prepared activities.

The contributions of peer interaction to the development of social competence in young children are considerable. Only in interactions with peers are children able to experiment with and practice social strategies among others of relatively equal status. Classroom contexts provide many opportunities for child-to-child interaction. Teachers who are aware of children's needs and emerging social goals can provide environments, activities, models, and guidance designed to assist children in developing their social confidence and abilities.

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